

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE & FISHERIES
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Waterfowl Population Estimates
in Louisiana's Coastal Zone Below
U.S. Highway 90 and on Catahoula Lake

Date: Coastal Zone: Jan. 9-10, 15
Catahoula Lake: Jan. 7
NW LA: Jan. 8, NE LA: Jan. 7
Scaup: Jan. 11

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Estimates made from Aircraft

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	70,000	3,000	**	73,000
MOTTLED	14,000	38,000		52,000
GADWALL	337,000	273,000	**	610,000
WIGEON	5,000	3,000		8,000
GW TEAL	330,000	55,000		385,000
BW TEAL	52,000	37,000		89,000
SHOVELER	172,000	3,000		175,000
PINTAIL	51,000	33,000		84,000
TOTAL DABBLERS	1,031,000	445,000	**	1,476,000
SCAUP	71,000	133,000		204,000
RINGNECKED	180,000	129,000	**	309,000
CANVASBACK	11,000	45,000	4,000	60,000
TOTAL DIVERS	262,000	307,000	4,000	573,000
TOTAL DUCKS	1,293,000	752,000	4,000	2,049,000
COOTS	170,000	648,000		818,000

COMMENTS:

The 2.05 million ducks estimated on this survey is little changed from the 1.94 estimated last month, 33% below last January's estimate of 3.07 million, and 31% below the long-term average of 2.99 million. The long-term trends in estimates from this survey for November, December, and January are graphically represented in Figure 1 below.

The increase in dabbling ducks from the December survey was mostly balanced by a decline in diving ducks, especially at Catahoula Lake where 152,000 fewer scaup, ring-necked ducks, and canvasbacks were counted on this survey compared to last month (although 20,000 ring-necked ducks and 13,000 canvasbacks were counted on the adjacent Catahoula NWR during the NE LA survey reported below). Estimates for gadwall (357,000 to 610,000), green-winged teal (181,000 to 385,000), scaup (117,000 to 204,000), and shoveler (102,000 to 175,000) showed the largest increases while ring-necked ducks (591,000 to 309,000) and canvasbacks (220,000 to 60,000) had the largest declines from the December survey. The 52,000 estimate for mottled ducks was 40% higher than December and the highest since 2012. Most mottled ducks were seen on transect lines in Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parish in SE LA, but the total estimate remains 30% below the long-term January average of 74,000. All other species except scaup and ring-necked ducks were below long-term January averages.

Distribution of ducks was skewed toward SW LA with 63% being counted in that region compared to the nearly even distribution in December. Dabbling ducks made up 80% of the estimate in SW LA, an increase from 70% in December, while diving ducks fell from 76% of the estimate in SE LA to 41% on this survey due to a large decline in ring-necked ducks (425,000 to 129,000) in that region. The large concentration of ring-necked ducks seen in the upper Terrebonne marshes south of Amelia in December were not present on this survey. Smaller, but notable concentrations in SE LA were seen on Delta Farms near Larose and the marshes northeast of Venice. In SW LA, concentrations of mixed dabbling ducks were seen on Lacassine NWR, Rockefeller Refuge, and the marshes near the western side of Grand Lake; and a concentration of ring-necked ducks was seen on a sewage lagoon near Rayne. Large groups of mostly snow geese were noted southwest of Gueydan and north of Lacassine NWR.

Water levels in the marsh were much higher in non-tidal locations across SW LA during this survey than in December and well above optimal for foraging dabbling duck. In tidal saline and brackish marshes, water levels were lower but not as low as reported in December. Relatively little submerged aquatic vegetation was visible, even in areas of low water. However, there was continued abundant shallow flooding in agricultural areas from past wet conditions and recent rainfall with some flooding in most fields and pastures. In SE LA, water levels were slightly higher than in December and good submerged aquatic vegetation was still evident in a number of surveyed locations. Consequently, habitat conditions in the coastal region are expected to remain about average overall.

Water level at Catahoula Lake increased markedly since the December survey and was 17 feet above management target during the survey. The 4,000 ducks on this survey were the fewest since 2009 when only 3,000 were counted, and are only 4% of the most recent 10-year average of 79,000 ducks. Target water level has seldom been maintained in January during the last 10 years, and 92% of the ducks counted on the lake have been diving ducks during that time.

Another 18,700 ducks were counted on the Northwest Louisiana survey, primarily on the locks, lakes, oxbows, and fields along the Red River and upper Toledo Bend reservoir. That is about the same as December, 7% lower than last January's count of 20,000, but is 21% higher than the most recent 10-year average of 15,400. Gadwall was the most abundant species (5,100), and along with shovelers (2,800), mallards (2,400), green-winged teal (2,100), ring-necked ducks (2,000), and scaup (1,200) accounted for 83% of the ducks counted. About 5,700 ducks were counted on managed impoundments near Bayou Pierre, 4,700 on the Lower Cane unit of Red River NWR, and another 4,700 on managed impoundments near Loggy Bayou. Habitat conditions were much wetter than the December survey with higher river levels and flooding in many adjacent pastures and fields. High water was noted in all reservoirs but only Wallace Lake had substantial coverage of invasive aquatics.

In Northeast Louisiana, 221,000 ducks and 153,000 geese (<5% white-fronted) were counted on selected habitats during the traditional cruise survey that was standardized in 2005. That is an 87%

increase from the 118,000 ducks and a 26% increase from the 121,000 geese counted in December. Similarly, those counts are over twice the 103,000 ducks and 68,000 geese counted last January when ice covered much of the surveyed area. The duck count is 18% higher than the most recent 10-year average of 187,000, but the goose count is 31% lower than the 10-year average of 221,000. Ring-necked duck (70,000) was the most abundant duck species that along with gadwall (64,000), pintail (31,000), mallard (24,000), canvasback (13,000), and shoveler (12,000), accounted for 97% of the ducks counted. The surveyed area continues to be far wetter than normal with increased backwater flooding in all river systems and flooding in agricultural habitats since the December survey. The largest concentrations were 69,000 mostly gadwalls, pintails, ringnecks and mallards in the Bonita/Mer Rouge area; 35,000 mostly ring-necked ducks and canvasbacks at Catahoula NWR; 32,000 mostly ring-necked ducks, shovelers, and gadwalls in the Bunkie/Grand Cote areas, and 31,000 mostly gadwalls, pintails, and mallards at Delta Farms east of Catahoula Lake. The biggest concentrations of geese were seen in agricultural fields in the Bonita/Mer Rouge area (80,000) and around Bunkie/Grand Cote (59,000).

Lastly, in December and January, LDWF conducts a scaup survey on Lakes Maurepas, Pontchartrain, and Borgne. An estimated 135,000 scaup were seen including 16,000 on Lake Borgne and 119,000 on Lake Pontchartrain. This is nearly identical to the 134,000 estimated in December with a slightly increased proportion on Lake Borgne (12% vs 2%). The birds on Pontchartrain continue to be concentrated on transects through the northwest portion of the lake, and observers noted another massive flock just offline that would have likely doubled the estimate. There were few birds on all other lines. The estimate from this survey is far more than the 9,200 scaup seen last January, but is 8% lower than the most recent 10-year January average of 146,000.

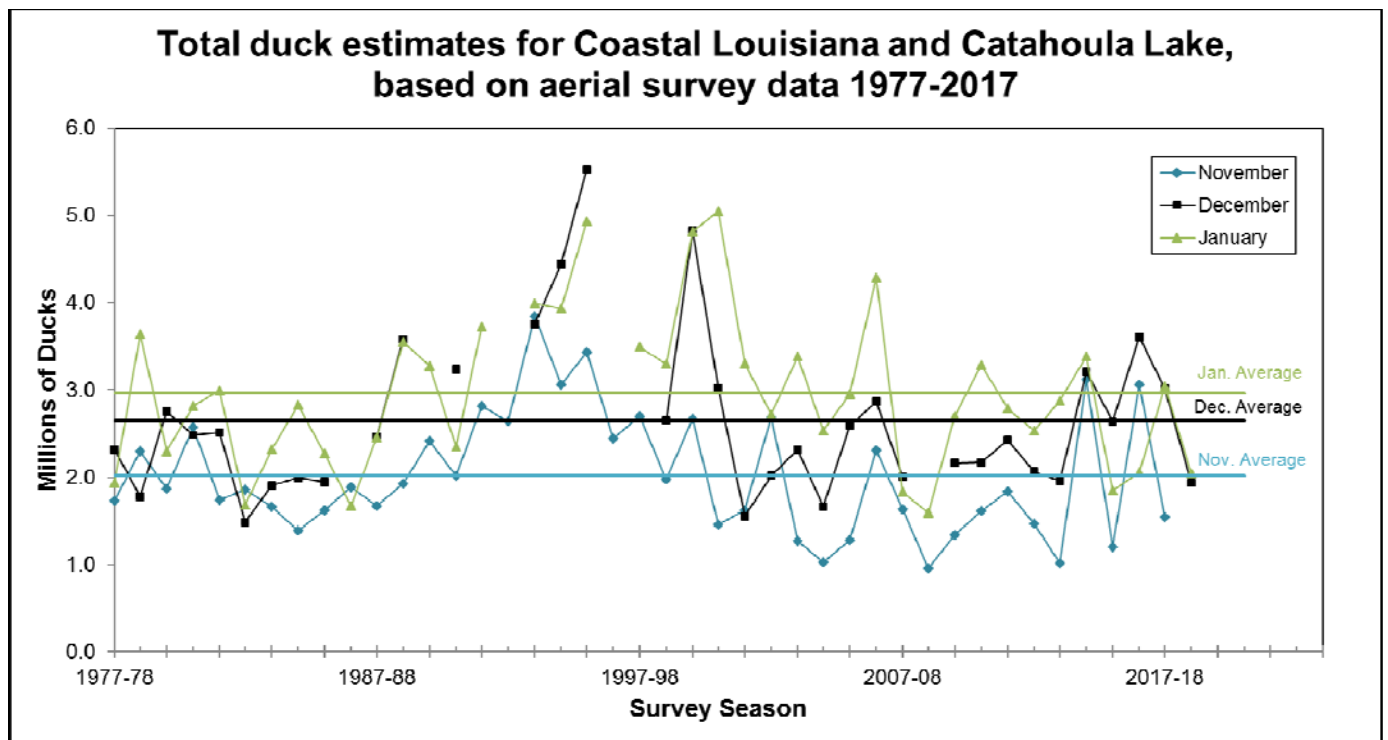


Figure 1: Trends in total ducks estimated from 27 transects in coastal Louisiana and a cruise survey of Catahoula Lake in November, December, and January 1977-2019.